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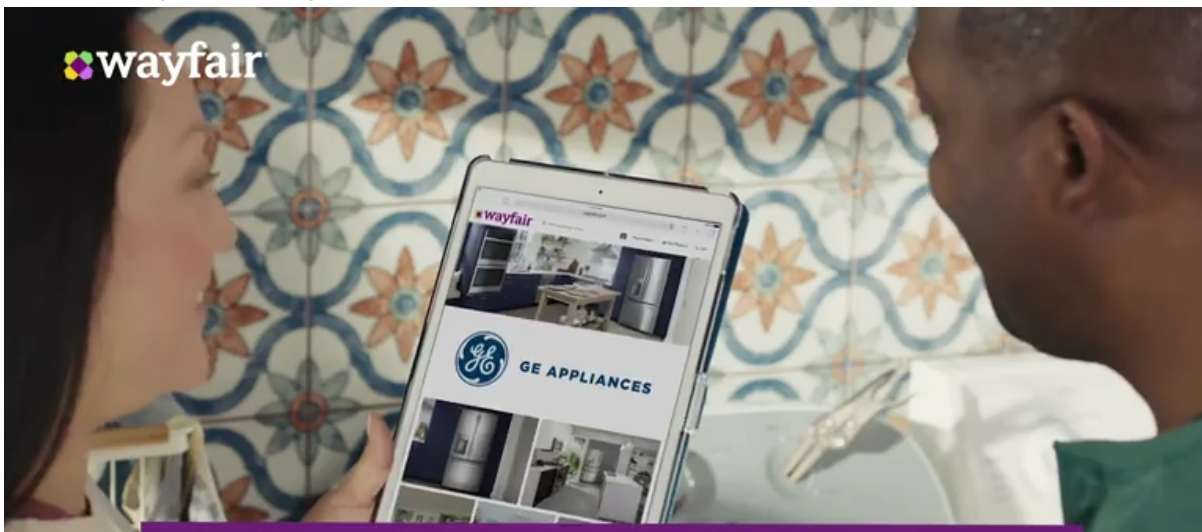
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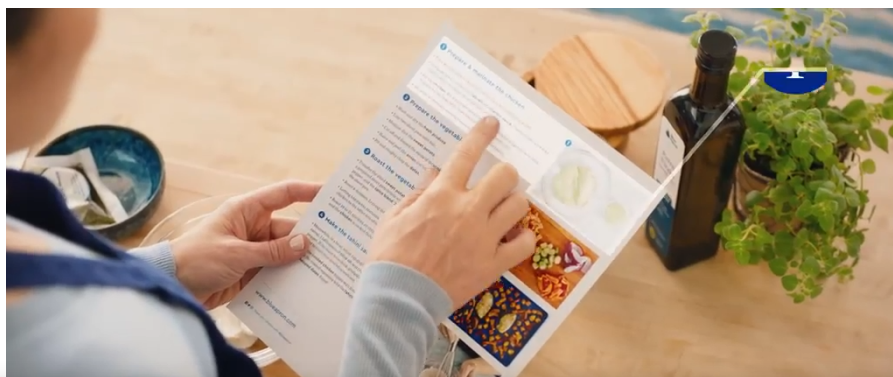
The warden of the troubled Metropolitan Correctional Center, who took over after the shocking suicide of Jeffrey Epstein, has retired after just a year on the job, sources tell the Daily News.

M. Licon Vitale's retirement does not officially go into effect until March, but she's been out of the troubled 750-bed jail since last week, according to a source. Rank and file correctional officers did not learn of her exit until a meeting on Tuesday announcing her replacement, acting Warden Eric Williams, sources said. A Manhattan Federal court filing said Williams, who previously ran FCI Greenville in South Carolina, is the new "interim warden" as of Wednesday.



The Metropolitan Correctional Center in downtown Manhattan. (Luiz C. Ribeiro/for New York Daily News)

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The final event resulting in Licon-Vitale's downfall, sources said, came last week when an inmate arriving at MCC for a psychiatric evaluation was left in a holding pen for 24 hours.

The inmate, Richard Quinn, is charged with receipt of child pornography and suffers from an array of ailments associated with morbid obesity, his attorney Peter Brill told The News. Quinn is 25 years old, Brill said, but has the mental capacity of an 8-year-old.

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Top officials at the Manhattan jail should have reported the disastrous oversight to the Bureau of Prisons' regional office in Philadelphia. Instead, a duty officer reported the incident, raising alarm among staff about a cover-up, sources said.

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"This goes to show how overworked the staff at MCC is," said Tyrone Covington, a correction officer and union rep at the jail. "Until the Bureau of Prisons takes staffing at MCC seriously these events will continue to take place."

Sources said dynamics between jail's management and staff were already strained. Around two months ago, a correction officer accused a member of jail leadership of sexual assault. Staff again feared a cover-up and the guard reported it to the Office of Inspector General herself, a source said.

"It's the talk of the jail," a source said.

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A different source familiar with the jail cautioned that reporting a sexual assault involving staff is shrouded in confidentiality, but did not deny widespread suspicion of a cover-up.



M. Licon-Vitale, former warden of the Metropolitan Correctional Center. (Facebook)

That source added that Licon-Vitale was well-regarded within the Bureau of Prisons and put in an impossible situation: managing the chronically understaffed, underfunded, dysfunctional jail that holds some of the country's most high-profile pre-trial inmates.

"She was undermined by that crew, the line staff. There's a culture there that is just rotten," the source said. "A lot of wardens go through that. They're retirement-eligible, are undermined by staff and say, 'F this.' MCC traditionally has problems like crazy — staff getting arrested, contraband."



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A former MCC correctional officer was sentenced last month to [three years in prison](#) for sexual abuse of female inmates. An investigation determined in March that [even terrorists](#) aren't properly monitored at the jail.

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Licon-Vitale's tenure was preceded by Epstein's shocking suicide on Aug. 10, 2019. The failure to keep the accused sex trafficker alive drew the attention of then-Attorney General Bill Barr, who cited a "perfect storm of screwups" at the jail. Two officers have pleaded not guilty to charges of falsifying records and sleeping on the job the night of Epstein's suicide, further [eroding staff morale](#).

When Licon-Vitale took over at jail [around January 2020](#), she quickly faced two major crises. In February, the jail went into lockdown after a gun was smuggled in. An intense, week-long cell by cell search uncovered a loaded firearm in an inmate housing area. The source familiar with the jail said the weapon — a fully loaded five-shot Derringer — was found behind a heating baseboard in a cell. Nearly a year later, no one has been charged in connection with the catastrophic security failure.

The lockdown was briefly lifted, only to be reinstated due to the coronavirus pandemic. The extent of the outbreak is widely believed to have been much more significant than Bureau of Prisons data show due to a lack of testing. Licon-Vitale [herself was infected](#), as well as her husband, who was assigned to the jail on a Justice Department detail, sources said. Inmates and staff recently began [receiving vaccines](#).

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The new warden has his work cut out for him. A probe by the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General has an ongoing probe into Epstein's death. Conditions at the jail remain [disgusting](#) and contraband is still out of control, according to numerous sources.

The Bureau of Prisons did not respond to several requests for comment. Efforts to contact Licon-Vitale directly were unsuccessful.

Stephen Rex Brown

New York Daily News



Stephen Rex Brown covers New York courts and criminal justice issues, with a focus on Manhattan Federal Court and Manhattan Supreme Court.

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